



L'Amour des Moules – A Documentary about Passion, Struggle and Life

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L'Amour des Moules is a Dutch/Belgian co-production about the life cycle of a sea mussel and the people who play an important role in this cycle. This creative documentary about passion, struggle and how life is (un)controllable will be released in 2012. Part of the filming of this documentary took place in July 2011 at the Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology in University Hospital Gasthuisberg in Leuven, Belgium. Director Willemiek Kluijfhout followed with a 35 mm film camera Leuven's fetal surgery team during one of their operations. In this article, Willemiek Kluijfhout explains her motivation for the documentary and how a fetus and a mussel come at all together. This remarkable documentary approaches the timeless and extraordinary symmetry between living organisms and humans that exist on our planet and how nature can show us biotechnological breakthroughs in medicine.

Biography

Director Willemiek Kluijfhout has a Master's Degree in Philosophy and graduated as a director at the Dutch Film Academy. She directs documentaries, short films and commercials. She lectures Film and Media Theory at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

Her grandparents lived on a dyke in Yerseke, Zeeland, a region in the South-West of the Netherlands. Yerseke is famous for its oysters and mussels. This small Dutch fishing town hosts the only mussel auction in the world, where shell-fish can be inspected for size, taste and weight. Since her childhood her grandparents took her to the mussel festival. She loved swimming in the oyster ponds, the smell of seaweed and mussels, the sounds of the mussel ships passing by, and the beautiful shells that were shining in the sunlight.

In more recent years, Willemiek Kluijfhout regularly filmed on a musselboat. She was impressed by the pure and natural way the mussels are cultured,

and by the knowledge and toughness of the mussel fishermen and the world in which they reside. Doing so, she started to admire the mussels themselves, for their taste and their complex and mysterious nature. The mussel grows almost three years before it shows up on a plate. It is a stubborn creature that only grows and becomes tasteful under certain circumstances. It has everything to do with the tide and the salty environment of Zeeland; actually the musselmen keep it as a trade secret. The mussel has to be well cared for and should not be stressed. A unique feature is that the threads of the mussels (see front cover) can attach and stick forever, also in under water conditions. This type of under water superglue is a miracle of nature that has no equal, and scientists have not been able to replicate it exactly.

During the development of the documentary the life of the mussel increasingly resonates with the lives of the protagonist; the mussel who loves, the mussel greedily swallows water, the foot searching for an anchor, the mussel torn in a storm. In the final film plan I started looking for that fusion, or say mirroring, of mussel and mankind. Mussel and mankind are mirrored throughout the documentary in moments that highlight the mystery, beauty and cruel inevitable fate of a lifecycle. Birth, hope, love and death.

About the movie

In the overwhelming world of sound and image we see today, I saw a unique similarity between the struggle to survive above water and that of the mussels below water. Filming using unique nature recordings I show the life of the mussel from its conception to its death. During that picture-story, we meet several people who have a special relationship with the mussel. They show us another way to look at the mussel. They also tell their own struggles in life. They show passion, inventiveness, humor and how they try to make life manageable.

Annelies Pronkers initiates the spectator into the sexual world of the mussel. In a laboratory she gets mussels 'in the mood'. Then, the excited male mussel sprays his seed in the water and moments later the female will follow. In the traditional world of mussel growers Annelies is helping nature, although this helping hand may be controversial. It turns out during the movie, that Annelies herself is pregnant from a musselman.

Jan Deprest is a gynaecologist. He and his team breach around 200 times the safe barriers of the uterus and gestational sac to perform fetal surgery. Unfortunately induction of a membrane defect inherently puts the pregnancy at risk for amniotic fluid leakage and preterm labour. Therefore for years fetal surgeons have explored ways to tackle or prevent the problem of membrane rupture, limiting the applications of fetal surgery. Interestingly, the mussel produces a unique glue that can stick in wet conditions. If Jan Deprest could use this mussel glue to close the membrane defect the mussels could save lives. First experiments look promising (Haller *et al.*, 2011).

Belgians love mussels but are not able to grow mussels in their own sea, because the Northsea is far too rough. The company **Reynaert/Versluys** in Oostende still tries to breed mussels in the Belgian sea and after thirteen years of blood, sweat and tears, they hope to finally bring a Belgian mussel on the market.

Mussels grow mainly in the Wadsea in the North of Holland. The protectors of the Wadsea will, for environmental reasons, no longer allow mussel fishermen. For many generations **Henk Jumelet** and his father Stef have always fished for mussel seeds in the Wadsea. Without seeds they can no longer grow mussels. Whilst Henk is convinced that the mussel is the food of the future, environmentally friendly and sustainable, how does he prove that before his company ceases to exist?

Artist **Dieuwke Parlevliet** built a musselbench in intertidal area in the Oosterschelde. A picnic bench only reachable when the tide is low. There you can eat mussels and watch the tide come up. When the tide is high, one can only see traces of the bench. Fourteen years ago, a disaster happened in Dieuwke's life, as she lost her husband and daughter. That cruelty of nature calls for stopping the time...

The bench shows how tides and time go by representing symbolically the relentless march forward, in a cycle that will never stop, neither for man nor for the mussel.

Each year Zierikzee elects in a secret ballot a **mussel princess**. However, not that many young girls are still living in the village of mussels. Who will be this year's Miss Mussel? What girl will wear the golden crown mussel?

In the documentary, major themes in the life of a mussel life and that of humans who relate to the mussel, emerge: birth, death, love and survival. In the way people in the documentary watch the mussel, their own life is reflected. As a spectator, you will witness the desire to control nature, to make reality predictable and existence bearable.

Musselglue

In October this year Willemiek Kluijfhout will film the sequel in Jan Deprest's laboratory. We will see if the musselglue will stick enough to the foetal membrane of pregnant rabbits and sheep, and can prevent the amniotic fluid to leak. Will it work? Is musselglue the solution that can make foetal operation less risky, or is it just another frustrating attempt in the tackling of the Achilles' heel of fetal surgery?

Jan Deprest remains moderately optimistic: "I have thought too many times that we found the solution. It is very well possible that it works for Mother Nature but not when used in artificial conditions. After all, the mussel does not make her glue for us. I am not sure if this glue will do. But if not this one, another one will do...!"

L'Amour des Moules is a production by Truetworks (NL) and Associate Directors (BE).

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Reference

Haller CM, Buerzle W, Brubaker CE *et al.* Mussel-mimetic tissue adhesive for fetal membrane repair: a standardized ex vivo evaluation using elastomeric membranes. *Prenat Diagn.* 2011;31:654-60.